

Arts

Dancing on the Edge festival shines a spotlight on family history

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- Lara Kramer's NGS ("Native Girl Syndrome"), with Angie Cheng, draws from her grandmother's life on the street, while Family Dinner (below) plays with etiquette.

Family histories—some tragic, some enlightening, and some, well, downright delicious—play into this year's Dancing on the Edge festival in a big way.

DANCING ON THE EDGE 2014

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At one end of the spectrum, you have Vancouver dancer-choreographer Justine Chambers reaching into her own past growing up a diplomat's daughter, with a mother who loved entertaining. Her *Family Dinner* serves up food while dancers intermingle with audience members at a table, playing with the physical language of meal etiquette.

On the other, you have Montreal choreographer Lara Kramer drawing inspiration from her grandmother's life on the streets. *NGS* ("*Native Girl Syndrome*") ends up being a disturbing portrait of addiction and destitution.

Sometimes family history can't help but influence art. "I come from a very progressive family but they're superstrict and I see that in my choreography," admits the self-described detail-obsessed Chambers, speaking over the phone on a visit to Toronto. "My family are social people. My mother is, to use hip-hop language, the original gangsta when it comes to the dinner party. She's doing an incredible performance: she's mediating, she can distract them through storytelling, she can distract through food. She's like the incredible glue that holds it all together. And that's much like choreography: it's your duty to be the glue in the room."

Chambers's interactive piece came to life during her residency with five other artists at the Hadden Park Field House. (They call themselves ten fifteen maple.) In the little former caretaker's house at the Kits Point park, there was a kitchen, and she started experimenting, with the group serving and eating a dinner together. But you could say *Family Dinner* has been developing her whole life. Let's just say she brought a lot of taught behaviour to the table of her new work.

"Whenever I would eat with my elbows out, my mother would ask me if I was taking off in flight. So now my elbows are always pinned to my sides when I eat," she says with a laugh. "And then there's the idea that a child should be seen and not heard at a party: no one spoke to me at the table and as a child I knew not to speak."

In preparation, she also read manners maven Emily Post's 80 pages on dining in *Etiquette*.

The result is an ever-evolving, tightly scored work that finds six audience members joining any six of the dancers (Tiffany Tregarthen, David Raymond, Alison Denham, Billy Marchenski, Josh Martin, Aryo Khakpour, Kate Franklin, and Michelle Lui) for dinner, with Chambers serving. Chambers switches up the menu, which comes courtesy of her mother in Alberta, checking in with visitors about their diet restrictions. It's a huge undertaking: she gets up at 7 in the morning to plan and do grocery shopping, then starts chopping food and preparing it at the field house. "My mother will send me recipes and I'll let her know if it's just too crazy," Chambers says. "I can't always be marinating; I tell her no more than a three-hour marinade. It's a fun thing for her and I to do together. It helps me to talk to her about it."

The food is as integral to the work as the choreography, as it turns out: "My entire life has been a dinner party, and if there's one thing I've learned it's that as long as the food is good, everything else can fall apart."

Chambers, who has hosted dinners during several three-week periods over the past year, says she adds different details to the movement vocabulary each night. Watch for repeated patterns and gestures that comment on our learned etiquette, deconstructed and looped into something else. But the conversation is kept loose and convivial.

"This is the thing about having an amazing cast: I never worry about what's happening to them. And they're so charming. It's important to me that we're able to extend the hospitality. We really work on how we speak to guests and work in space. We want to get to know the audience."

At the end of the party, the group reveals what it's choreographed, and what it hasn't, in the preceding hour or two.

She admits everything changes with each audience, and, even when it's an awkward mix, she says it's "fascinating to navigate".

You get the feeling Chambers, like her mother, is the ultimate host. "I'm obsessed with creating community and I believe that's how we'll survive as artists. I feel like community-building is essential. Since I've had these dinners I've met 88 people who I didn't know before and I still talk to some of them....Some just knock on the door to

say hi or see if any of us are there. It's this thing about artists engaging with everybody."

Lara Kramer's NGS seeks to engage its audience, too, but in a completely different way. Wrested out of a dark part of her family's history, it's meant to focus our attention on the marginalized women we normally avert our eyes from. Watching NGS, we cannot look away.

"I didn't want to censor; I wanted to do justice to the content and not beat around the bush," says Kramer, speaking to the *Straight* from her home base in Montreal.

The artist, who's Cree-Ojibwa on her maternal side, is not known for shying away from tough subjects or imagery. Her 2009 work *Fragments* was based on her mother's stories of residential school, and at last year's *Dancing on the Edge*, she writhed and cavorted in a bathtub in of good moral character. It was on that last visit that she and her husband decided to take a walk along East Hastings in the Downtown Eastside, where the artist observed the kind of pained movement and dislocation she portrays on-stage.

But the piece has much deeper, personal roots. Kramer's grandmother grew up on the remote Lac Seul Reserve in northwestern Ontario and was later taken to residential school. When she finally returned to her reserve at age 16, there was no work. So she moved to the streets of Winnipeg and spiralled into addiction.

"I only met my grandmother once when I was nine years old and her state wasn't good," says Kramer. "She'd deteriorated from a hard lifestyle. I pieced her story together through other family members.

"She had 12 children, and they were all taken from her because she was an addict, and among them they don't even have her whole story."

Kramer shared interviews with her family with her dancers, and began to focus on what it would feel like to be on the street, and how it grew out of the history of residential schools. She started working with them on the twitching and quirks of addiction, something Kramer says comes from a "fragmented" body.

She worked with props early on: the main one is a baby carriage that carries bags, discarded cans, and other collected detritus instead of a child—a nod to her own grandmother’s lost offspring.

“I said to the two performers [Angie Cheng and Karina Iraola], ‘Your house has to be on wheels,’” Kramer says.

Amid the process, the dance artist decided it was also important to return to her grandmother’s reserve—a place she hadn’t seen since she was three.

“The state of affairs up there was not good either,” Kramer says matter-of-factly of a once-proud nation of nomads and trappers now facing the social problems that followed forced residential schooling. “And I think that just gave me the courage to take it farther,” she says of *NGS*.

“When I saw the amount of addiction and suicide,” she adds, “in a way I felt the streets were safer for my grandmother.”

In depicting what happens to women on those streets, Kramer aims for deeper meaning. “I want to show the addiction as something larger,” she explains. “There is a cultural genocide that’s happened in Canada and is continuing to happen, and these characters are a result of that.”

And so it is with art: the familiar and personal moves fluidly into universal truths.

Dancing on the Edge presents Family Dinner at Hadden Park Field House from July 9 to 11 (by reservation) and *NGS* (“*Native Girl Syndrome*”) at the Firehall Arts Centre from Monday to next Wednesday (July 7 to 9).